

MARX'S PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY

Balance Sheet After a Century

FRANZ BORKENAU

MARXISM presents itself as a science capable of practical application. Its best interpreters have laid stress, first and foremost, upon the relation between theory and practice, upon their "unity," which Marx is alleged to have realized for the first time in the whole history of critical thought (in contrast to all previous metaphysics). But the hallmark of modern science is that it treats practice—that is, experimental verification—as the final measure of the validity of all doctrine, and that it makes doctrine itself no more than a function of practice. Is Marxism a science in this sense? Certainly not. Neither Marx himself nor any orthodox Marxist was ever willing to admit that Marxism, like any genuine scientific theory based on experiment, is only a provisional hypothesis subject to constant and unlimited revision as new facts emerge. Yet only such an attitude can be called truly scientific.

Let us therefore stop talking about Marxism as a scientific theory. Marxism is a faith, a dogma, and the task of Marxists has been not to fit doctrine to the facts but, on the contrary, to persuade us that the facts, whatever they are, can always be reconciled with doctrine.

For a century now, the theories of Marxism have been subjected to a many-sided testing in practice such as few other political doctrines have known. FRANZ BORKENAU here tries to draw up a balance sheet of the chief Marxist doctrines: which have seemed to stand up under the test of history, and which have been proved faulty. Mr. Borkenau was active in left-wing German politics in the 20's. He came to England in 1934, and returned to Germany after the war to teach history at the University of Marburg. His books include an important study of the rise of the modern world outlook (in German), and *World Communism*, published in this country in 1939.

Marx himself was the victim of a profound self-deception. He thought he had broken completely with all religion. But Marxism differs from other types of religion only in that it rejects tradition and revelation, and invokes empirical facts in their stead—yet it invokes only such facts as agree with the faith. No doubt a faith deriving from the experiences of the age of industrial revolution is something profoundly different from a faith handed down from the past or directly revealed. Marx's faith was indeed a "materialist" one—but it remained faith. If religion is defined as belief in the supernatural, then Marxism is not a religion; but if dogmas, especially those whose partial rejection is deemed heresy, always constitute a theology, then Marxism is indeed a religion.

MARXISM is a religion in this formal sense. But it would be a serious mistake to think that faith and dogma could ever arise without the promptings of a genuine religious longing. Marxism is a religion not only in form, but also because of the motives that brought it into being. It is a religion of salvation.

Since the 1880's an uninterrupted succession of zealous university professors has been busy "refuting" Marxism. But none of them has recognized what is both obvious and decisive: namely, that the *Communist Manifesto's* conception of the final goal of history is identical with the millenium of the Old Testament prophets and of certain heretical Christian sects. Communism (in its "higher stage of development," as Marx cautiously added in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*) was to be a social order without a state and without rulers, without oppression, competition, or class antagonisms, without exploitation and, of course, without

want. This would not be because God would provide all the inhabitants of his Paradise with everything they needed, but because Marx's new demiurge, the "forces of production," would pour out gifts like an inexhaustible horn of plenty. There would be a social order in which human enmities, national states, and wars would disappear. Man would finally prove that he was conceived in goodness, and religion would become superfluous—as would all superimposed morality, and the family itself insofar as it was an institution of private property.

Lenin's main contribution to Marxist thought was to revive this messianism. He was completely right in accusing the Western schools of Marxism of having tampered with the genuine doctrine. Lenin's painstaking and faultless philological reconstruction of the millennial aspect of Marxism served to remove all doubt that Marx's conception of the higher or final stage of Communism was anything but a kind of crude doctrinal belief in a messianic age. Everything that Marx says in this connection can be found in Isaiah, and the Waldensians, Taborites, and Anabaptists repeated the same message in their sermons. Only by keeping this in mind is it possible to see at how many points Marx simply reinvigorated the ideas of visionaries of previous ages, and to what extent he added to this vision new elements deriving from the habits of thought of his own age. Actually, Marxism states this: previously the hope of a life without want, war, or injustice was mere utopianism, and therefore nothing but a religious dream; but the technological revolution now provides us with the certainty that this dream can and will be materialized on earth. This is the "scientific" element in Marx's "scientific socialism."

THERE lie hidden in Marx's teachings unformulated metaphysical assumptions that Marx himself overlooked, because, like all prophets, he felt that he was announcing something entirely new, and he therefore refused to recognize any connections between his doctrines and those of former

times—that is, those of "utopian" millenarianism. And although he so painstakingly quoted every forerunner of his in the field of political economy, he never liked to be reminded of his dependence upon the doctrines of the French Enlightenment either. Marx does not, as far as I am aware, ever quote Condorcet, yet his indestructible faith in progress derives directly from that theoretician of the French Gironde. That all human wickedness was due only to social conditions, he regards as an axiom needing no proof, and he concludes that the essential goodness of human nature would naturally flower in a Communist society. Surely this faith in human goodness shows Marx to be a rather naive follower of Rousseau—whom he nevertheless despised.

Marxism can be said in effect to have brought about a reconciliation between those two mutually hostile tendencies of the French Enlightenment: the Girondist faith in "progress" and the Jacobin belief in "a return to nature." This synthesis is not the smallest factor among the forces that gave Marxism its impetus. The idea that the progress of knowledge and of industry would restore the harmony of primitive societies probably marks the highest point attainable in millennial utopianism.

Belief in the natural goodness of man has not always been professed by people of especial kindliness. In Rousseau it was actually the expression of a deep bitterness, of a quarrel with life that ended in madness and suicide. In the case of Marx—and of the anarchists too—an enormous bitterness likewise lay at the root of this faith in man's natural goodness. If man was good by nature, then all human wickedness was the personal responsibility of those who had created and maintained the conditions that made him evil. In the realm of theory, Marx had avoided this conclusion (which both Rousseau and the anarchists upheld) by treating the whole course of history, from primitive down to ultimate Communism, as an inevitable process of evolution for which no individual or group of individuals could be held responsible. But every critic of

Marxism has noted that, at this point more than any other, Marx could be seen to be playing with an empty formula that served to hide his deeper impulses. Every line of Marx's writings betrays a fund of hatred. With the Jacobins and with the anarchists, he shared the conviction that it was necessary to exterminate all those who were preventing man from being good. In his *The Gods are Athirst*, Anatole France, that sceptical Voltairian socialist, drew with acid humor the portrait of a young Jacobin who could not await the abolition of the death penalty—but first all enemies had to be exterminated! Nowhere more than here did Marx reveal himself a son of the Jacobins; and at no other point was Lenin so much his heir. It was no accident that Lenin, in going back to the roots of Marxism, defined the Marxist as a "Jacobin united to the proletariat by unbreakable ties."

Marx and Lenin share further common ground with both the Jacobins and the anarchists: for them the "circle of the wicked" expands as they gaze at it until it comes to include everybody save themselves and their closest followers. Those who lead the movement of liberation into false paths are to be considered even more responsible for the continuance of evil than are the outright partisans of the status quo, and they therefore deserve even fiercer hatred. So far in history, belief in the pure and essential goodness of man (or of a group of men) has always been the preliminary to massacre. Marxism took more time to establish a "reign of terror" than did Rousseau's movement, but only because Marxism in the 19th century soon became "bourgeois"—that is, most Marxists quickly lost faith in a millennium and in the absolute goodness of human nature. When Lenin, however, restored its religious element to Marxism, a reign of terror followed immediately.

THE sense of an imminent doom threatening man and his salvation by a last-minute intervention is the driving force of orthodox Marxism in the field of practical politics, and also the factor responsible for its sudden

transition from a *belief in progress* to a *dictatorship by force*. To establish the identity between Marx's conception of the final stage of Communism and the beliefs that inspired the ravings of the Anabaptists of Muenster, three hundred years before the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, is not enough. It is also necessary to demonstrate the influence of this doctrinal element upon Marx's concrete analyses of the political and economic problems of his own age.

It is well known that Marx is a prophet whose political forecasts have gone wrong time and again. This was partly the result of his remarkable lack of practical sense—a lack that was not unconnected with his millennial faith. His was a distorted picture of reality, a picture dominated by a belief in the imminence of some apocalyptic upheaval that would change the whole social world and, with it, human nature. Capitalism was moving towards an increasingly intolerable state of tension; on the one side wealth was accumulating in ever greater concentrations, and this brought with it the increasing accumulation of misery on the other side. The language of religion had described this development as a state of growing sinfulness that would call forth in the end a terrible divine punishment. God would intervene miraculously to destroy the sinners and save the remnant of the just, and, most important, "the last would be the first."

Marx appropriated this whole apocalyptic picture quite unwittingly; it was derived from the Old and in part from the New Testament, and it had been elaborated in the teachings of various Christian sects of the poor, such as the Taborites and the Anabaptists. That Marx himself overlooked this debt can be explained in part by the existence of an intermediate link: he had derived his own apocalypse directly from the extreme wing of the Jacobins, who had secularized the idea by adapting it to *their* scheme of things. Yet the mistakes in Marx's analysis of the development of capitalism that are attributable to this apocalyptic view cannot be excused exclusively by Marx's tendency to be overly impressed by the suf-

ferings of the proletariat during the Industrial Revolution—seeing in them that “growth of sinfulness” which would inevitably bring on the “end of days”—and by his failure to make due allowance for the forces tending to reduce this misery in the further course of capitalist development. The cause of his fundamental mistake was more serious than that. The thing that mattered most to Marx was precisely his *vision* of an apocalyptic catastrophe; and his capacity for analyzing historical developments was completely paralyzed wherever tendencies appeared that contradicted this vision.

It has often been observed that though Marx was quite correct in many respects in his analysis of the trends of English capitalism, he failed completely to understand the development of the British labor movement. This was a remarkable contradiction. The fact is that Marx viewed industrial capitalism as the main and constant factor in the development of the labor movement precisely because it had produced the labor movement in the first place and seemed by its own internal laws to be driving it towards revolution. Had Marx been primarily a scientist seeking the laws of social development, he would, however, have focused his political analysis on the British labor movement itself in the same way that he focused his economic analysis on British industry. It is true that he did this as long as the British labor movement took the form of Chartism—which he misinterpreted as a thoroughly revolutionary affair. But when, after 1850, the movement adopted unmistakably peaceful and gradualist methods, Marx lost interest in it and thereby deprived himself of the best means of attaining to that social insight which alone would have enabled him to establish a correct theory of the labor movement and of the transformation of capitalism into socialism.

Actually, as we see today, the labor movement has grown more and more peaceful and class antagonisms have decreased as capitalism has developed. Not America, England, Switzerland, or Belgium—but Russia, China, the Balkans, and Mexico

have become the theaters of revolution. The social revolution of which Marx dreamt has materialized exclusively in non-capitalist countries, societies where capitalism had just touched the surface of economic life. “Capitalism” and “revolution,” which Marx saw as Siamese twins, have proved to be mutually exclusive in actual fact. This was Marx’s major error in the field of political sociology.

The real trend of events, therefore, has not confirmed Marx’s apocalyptic expectations. When Lenin resurrected these, he, like Marx before him, had to attempt to escape the contradiction between dogma and reality. But plain facts could now no longer be denied, especially since in August 1914 the patriotic feelings of the workers of all countries had been proven beyond any ambiguity. Lenin reacted to the attitude of the labor movements of Western Europe in August 1914 with an outburst of fury. As an “explanation,” he offered the notion that the proletariat of the West was not a real proletariat, but a “labor aristocracy” bribed by the bourgeoisie. This “theory” had some basis in reality; there was, and is, that great chasm between Western wealth and Eastern misery which today makes even the Rumanian workers appear “bourgeois” in the eyes of the Russian soldiers. Thus, despite all its own assumptions, integral Marxism was forced to seek its home in the East and not in the West. Its faith in the revolutionary role of social misery corresponded better to the facts in the economically backward East, and the same was true of its apocalyptic vision, which accorded better with habits of thought there.

FROM all this it would appear that what is most false about political Marxism is the historical role it assigns the working class. During the last hundred years, the social and economic order of the West, which depends upon industrialism, has been subject to a constant process of change. Extreme individualism has been replaced by an increasing measure of planning. The realm of public property is expanding. The state’s share in the national income has grown to

an amazing extent everywhere. But it would be hard to argue that all this has been the achievement exclusively of the proletariat. In England these steps were taken by Conservative, Liberal, and Labor governments, without difference. In Germany—whose development did not, to be sure, proceed on classical capitalist lines—Bismarck and Hitler mark the decisive stages in the growth of a statist economy. It would also be a mistake to think that all these forces acted primarily under the pressure of the working classes. There was also the pressure, sometimes much more effective, of farmers and peasants, of the lower middle classes, of powerful bureaucracies, and, not infrequently, of capitalist groups seeking additional security. The New Deal is, after all, perhaps the classical case. Insofar as the CIO can be said to represent the “class-conscious” sector of the American labor movement, it owes its existence to Roosevelt’s efforts to create one more mass support for his planning measures. It would be more correct to say that the CIO is a product of the planned state than that state planning is a result of CIO pressure.

The fact is that labor has just as great an interest in limiting the power of the state as any other class in society. It has a compelling interest in the right freely to choose its employer and its place of residence and in liberty of action for unions and cooperatives. The so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the Soviet Union amounts to nothing more, from the viewpoint of the individual worker as well as that of the labor movement, than total helplessness, oppression, and dire misery. No class can maintain its economic and social position without the possibility of defending its interests by action independent of the power of the state.

AND yet there is another side to the picture, which becomes apparent as soon as one breaks the spell of the eschatological aspect of Marxism. Marx predicted a revolutionary catastrophe that would suddenly transform capitalism into socialism. This catas-

trophe has failed to materialize in the most highly developed capitalist countries, but nonetheless it cannot be denied that the transformation of capitalism into socialism is proceeding, even if only step by step and not with radical completeness.

When Marx published the *Manifesto*, sociologists and economists were divided into two camps, with a larger group believing in “the eternal life of capitalism” and a smaller expecting some miracle that would suddenly introduce socialism. Marx was the first, and, in the days of the *Manifesto*, the only man clearly to perceive that socialism was not an invention but rather the very shape of things to come, and that it only remained for the conditions for its emergence to mature first within the womb of the old society. Therein rested the decisive superiority of Marxism to all other contemporary thinking on these matters. And it was this insight that the English Fabians and the German revisionists held on to.

But Marx was not only right in predicting that *capitalism* would transform itself into *socialism*, he was also quite correct in predicting *revolution*. A revolution, however, that can scarcely be taken as the end-product of advanced capitalism. Social revolution has developed only on the fringes of the capitalist order and, despite all the kindly intentions of the Communists, it has not managed to reach the center. But if Marx was wrong about the proletarian revolution as far as the main industrial countries are concerned, he was certainly right in predicting that the transition from capitalism to socialism would take place amid terrible worldwide convulsions, in an age of wars and revolutions (though the wars are not class wars and the revolutions have little that is genuinely proletarian about them).

It was the weakness of the reformists that, while they accepted Marx’s analysis of the socialist trends within capitalist society, they failed to recognize the element of reality in Marx’s revolutionary prognostications. Conversely, labor’s revolutionary wing, in accepting Marx’s revolutionary forecast, refused categorically to admit the necessity of

revising it in any respect. So it was that the reformist wing failed wherever it found itself confronted with a revolutionary situation; it was a success in the English-speaking countries, in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, and to a much smaller extent also in France—but not elsewhere. Whereas the revolutionary wing split almost from the beginning into two groups, both foreshadowed in the conflict between Marx and Bakunin. Later on, one of these wings—the half-syndicalist group best represented by Rosa Luxemburg, which was determined to uphold the libertarian traditions of the West—found itself enmeshed in the contradiction between liberty and the idea of a revolutionary dictatorship. The other half of the revolutionary wing culminated in Bolshevism.

WHAT kind of correction, then, does the Marxist revolutionary idea need? The Communists themselves admit that the revolution is not proceeding according to Marx's schedule, a concession which is usually expressed by saying that the "weakest link" of capitalism broke first. But may we then expect the triumphant progress of the revolution from the periphery to the center, especially now that it has the support of the armed power of Russia? Though history alone can give the final answer, Marxist utopianism still feeds on this expectation, and Marx's apocalyptic dream has been transformed into the vision of a conquest of the West by Eastern despotism. But even this vision, for all its fierceness, is still inspired in part by those elements which created the original Marxist ideal.

Every revolution begins with a liberation and ends up in a despotism. Every revolution culminates in a revolutionary attack upon the rest of the world. Every revolution has its libertarian, its Jacobin, and its Napoleonic phases, which mark the throttling of the revolutionary impulse and lead on to the collapse of the revolutionary regime. Nor is this all. The positive and practical results of the whole revolutionary crisis—that is, the new social order—only emerge clearly and completely once the revolution-

ary cycle has been completed with the collapse of the Napoleonic regime. The paradox involved in every revolution is that only when it comes to an end do the right conditions appear for the full emergence of its results. And this paradox has its source in the apocalyptic vision that seems to accompany all revolutions. Only when this vision has faded, and with it the revolutionary regime, can the new social order develop along the lines natural to it.

Applied to the present, this morphology of revolutions would seem to indicate that Stalinism's chances for world conquest are pretty much those of Napoleon; but it would also seem to indicate that a "defeat of Communism" would no more involve a "defeat of socialism" than the fall of Napoleon involved the final defeat of the liberal principles of the French Revolution. In a word, the necessary correction of Marx's analysis of the process of revolution again involves the elimination of the apocalyptic elements of Marxism. Marxist revolutionaries tend to treat their conquest of one country as a final, irrevocable event opening a new phase in human history. Nothing is more likely, however, than that this conquest will prove merely an episode, a tragic episode, perhaps an unavoidable one, on the road from an old society to a new one.

THIS provides a *locus standi* for an evaluation of the most exclusively theoretical part of Marxism, namely its general sociology, its "historical materialism." In Marx's and Engels' own writings this subject does not amount to much more than a heading. The text consists of a few haphazard observations. This surely constitutes an unusual situation. Rousseau, in his own way, had much more to offer, and the Christian millenarians still more. Marx's disciples themselves have contributed astonishingly little to a further elaboration of the sketchy foundations of historical materialism. Marxism has boasted too much of its anti-religious foundations to have allowed a truly religious dogmatic elaboration of its basic apocalyptic vision—and that is the only kind that would

have been relevant. But on the other hand Marxism has also been much too dogmatic to produce significant results in the field of independent scientific research. Nevertheless, the concepts of historical materialism have exerted what has to be termed a decisive influence on so-called "bourgeois" science, that is, on those social scientists who have not been controlled by dogma. Here historical materialism has proved itself a fertile idea, and we can say of it what has already been said about Marx's political doctrine: sterile and destructive where manipulated as a dogma, it became fertile and progressive in the hands of the adversaries of doctrinaire Marxism.

Both the narrowest and widest aspects of Marxism made themselves felt wherever that doctrine influenced science. Its economic point of view was applicable to the problems of the second half of the 19th century almost without qualification. Marx's faith in the decisive importance of a metaphysical entity called "economic life" tallied with the philosophy of the typical bourgeois; but Marx was superior to the middle-class believers in economic determinism because, in addition to the economic interests of the bourgeoisie, he saw other economic interests and was able to make their competitive struggle the central point of his interpretation of history. In a sense Marxism can be taken as a perfect image of the last period of the bourgeois age. The more it was officially anathematized, the more it became the secret regent of contemporary thought.

But Marx also widened this view into the theory that, not nature, but *man's struggle to control nature* is the essential content of human history. And it is this notion that has given a decisive impulse to the modern social sciences. In man's struggle with nature lies the difference between human and beast, since animals remain simply part of their natural environment. There are, to be sure, many ambiguities here. It is implied that

man, on the one hand, is bound to nature but, on the other, confronts it as an independent power. The attempt, therefore, to identify Marx's philosophy of history with simple deterministic materialism as a general metaphysical system is rather thoughtless.

FINALLY, what is perhaps the strongest element in Marxism is its insight that we are on the point of a new and decisive phase in the struggle with nature. Our control of natural forces, our recent success in penetrating the very processes of the creation of matter—all these suggest the beginnings of an age whose culture will differ from our present urban culture no less than the latter differs from neolithic rural culture.

Or will all higher civilization disappear with the fuller liberation of the new forces now at our command? If so, then Marx was fundamentally wrong. But if mankind succeeds in making the drastic transition, at whatever sacrifice, then Marx's basic view will have been verified. And it will also certainly have been established that a decisive step forward in the control of nature is always a decisive step in human history.

This experiment may last a thousand years and surely nobody today can foretell the end-result. One thing is certain: the immature apocalyptic vision that expects an industrial proletariat, armed with the flaming sword of justice, to bring about a heaven on earth will then appear as what it truly is: a grotesque exaggeration of the importance of one particular episode of modern social history.

Marx's basic fallacy consists in combining an earthworm's perspective with large hypotheses that apply to thousands of years of human history. But if Marx's truculent vision of the apocalypse prompts criticism and even ridicule, nothing can gainsay the fundamental contribution that his daring mind has made to the essential course of modern thought.